

Energy Concerns On the Rise

Architects' Survey Reveals Clients' Interest in Efficiency

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High home fuel prices have Americans looking for some big-ticket ways to save energy.

According to the American Institute of Architects' quarterly survey of demand for particular design features, the percentage of architects reporting that energy-management systems had become more popular rose to 54 percent, from 38 percent in 2005.

"I was surprised how quickly energy percolated to the top of the list," said Kermit Baker, AIA's chief economist. He said energy concerns are far different today than in recent years when homeowners simply rolled out another batt of insulation in the attic, put on another sweater or dialed down the thermostat.

Are they willing to put some money behind their concerns? According to the AIA poll, 90 percent would be willing to pay \$5,000 more for a house that would use less energy.

Requested design changes include doing away with grand, dramatic entryways with high ceilings that are tough to heat. High-efficiency windows and motorized dampers to shut off ductwork to unused areas of a home are also considered.

Even homeowners in warmer climates where summer cooling costs outweigh winter heating concerns are climbing aboard the energy-efficiency bandwagon.

In Los Angeles, energy-efficient alterations rank second behind kitchen remodeling as the most appealing home improvement, according to Bank of

America. The bank reports top-flight windows and solar panels are coveted Los Angeles area upgrades.

Atlanta architect Lisa Stacholy said that most of her clients, after getting walloped by soaring natural gas prices during the last few hot and humid summers, are willing to pony up for energy-efficient features.

Stacholy said their efforts to save a buck on energy are also reflected in concerns about how soon the improvement will pay for itself.

"They're willing to go with design improvements as long as it doesn't cost them a premium," Stacholy said. The typical payback period, she said, is 1 1/2 to two years, for a 35 to 45 percent reduction in energy costs. "That's when they're willing to bite the bullet to make changes," she said.

On top of overall design features, Stacholy often recommends replacing antiquated air-conditioning and heating units with old-style compressors and condensers.

In fact, today it's hard to change one unit without paying to upgrade the other. Many older heating, ventilating and air-conditioning systems work off the same compressor unit. Homeowners are advised to talk to their designer or heating and cooling experts as they mull changes that can cost \$4,500 or more.

In addition to cost, AIA economist Baker said that energy concerns seem to mirror larger societal concerns for "green and sustainable design," he said. "Not long ago people just coped with high costs, now they want to do something about it."